

Demographic Change Regions Network

Response to the Commission consultation on 'Growing Regions, growing Europe: Public consultation on the future of EU Cohesion Policy'

January 2008

The "Demographic Change Regions Network" welcomes 'Growing Regions, Growing Europe: The fourth report on economic and social cohesion', and its corresponding consultation process. The network takes the opportunity to follow up on its previous position paper to the European Commission entitled 'Joint Declaration of European Regions: Facing Demographic Change as a Regional Challenge' (October 2006), by submitting a joint cross-regional response to the consultation specifically on demographic change. Despite demographic issues impacting on all aspects of economic and cohesion policy, we as a network felt it more productive to limit our response to, and comment solely on the following question within the consultation process:

1.2. Given wide differences in birth rates, death rates and migratory flows at regional level, what is the role of cohesion policy in responding to demographic change?

Key messages

Both the Lisbon Agenda and EU Cohesion policy goes hand in hand in improving the economic, social and environmental potential of European regions. Since working together as a network we have come to realise the demographic differences between regions in the network, which reflects general patterns across the EU. The commonality is that we are all affected by the demographic challenge in some way, whether that is an ageing population, a declining population or the societal challenges associated with migration. We, the network, believe that future EU Cohesion policy can play a major role in helping European regions adapt to these new emerging concerns. We believe this can be achieved in the following ways;

- The Commission addresses the European demographic challenges, for example shrinking populations, increase of elderly people and migration (to name a few) with supportive funding streams. It has been identified in many recent Commission communications that demographic change is one of the new global issues that countries and regions are now facing. We as regions need supportive financial measures to be able to share experiences and information and to carry out the relevant changes in our regions in order to be more competitive, more productive and more innovative
- The Commission and specifically Eurostat need to provide regional strategists and demographers with current and relevant statistics at a regional level in order to more efficiently address the demographic problems identified above
- In order to improve the competitiveness of the regions, proper attention and support should be given to SMEs and their workers, especially migrant and older workers, in their adjustment to the demographic challenge. This could include qualifications, skills and training for older and migrant workers and encouraging innovative practices among the older and migrant work force, changing the attitude of employers
- In terms of investment in new infrastructure, consideration should be given to future challenges and long term needs of the population, such as access for all and forthcoming changes of demand. This could come in the form (not just a tick box) of a 'demographic check' that ensures new infrastructure is compatible with demographic changes
- Greater effort needs to be paid to supporting the integration of migrants and older people into communities, labour markets, enterprise, skills and training systems in order to create a more cohesive society that understands each others needs and cultures. The education and lifelong learning requires further improvement namely with regard to early education, older people and migrants.
- Since demographic change leads to significantly different developments on the regional level, it is threatening the territorial cohesion and should thus be considered in the upcoming green paper on European territorial cohesion.

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Differences in birth, life expectancy, mortality and migration are caused by a multitude of reasons. Cohesion policy is not a panacea and can influence only some of these, in e.g. the attractiveness of regions or the availability of services and employment. However these factors are not to be undervalued while looking at development on the regional level. Cohesion policy also plays an important role in helping regions and people to manage the transformations which are needed to adapt to the consequences of demographic change.

In order to achieve this, demographic developments on regional and local levels have to be considered in a differentiated way. On the one hand there are variations between and within the regions of the 27 EU Member States, which will in some cases be reinforced by divergent trends, and on the other hand particular patterns of development are discernable in several European regions. In the future, political strategies and guidelines for regions, cities and municipalities will have to rely on realistic and small scale population forecasts.

Furthermore, it will be required to review the current orientation of European strategies on growth, including cohesion policy. These strategies have an increasing focus on economic development which should be complemented by social initiatives to support an integrated approach. Regions facing a decline in population need to develop strategies and supportive initiatives that safeguard social services and services of general interest, providing elementary requirements and future coverage. Access to infrastructure has to be maintained and to remain sustainable for those regions with decreasing populations, especially in scarcely populated areas. Regional development strategies are starting to take into account these societal changes and it is essential that the European Union supports regions when addressing these challenges. The question of economic and social development, while facing declining population and regional disparities, is rather a qualitative than a quantitative issue. Policy, which has hitherto been focused on growth, will need in addition, to take account adaptation. If interventions of policies should be successful, new and different measures, as well as toolkits for success and criteria to measure the success of political intervention, need to be developed. On a European level this should be supported through the continuing exchange of information and good practice, with regions learning from the successes **and** mistakes of other regions in the area of demographic change.

Demographic change should be treated as an interdisciplinary topic in European policy so that long term risks can be tackled in good time and opportunities be identified and exploited. Therefore it will be necessary to face even unpleasant truths, and to take into consideration all facts in public debates. **Only when the reality of an ageing society and declining population is acknowledged by both public and policy-makers as a fact, can appropriate political strategies be formulated.**

Given the fact that rural areas are being more affected by a declining and ageing population, there is a strong need for coherence with the second pillar of the Common Agriculture Policy (CAP). It is essential that financial strengthening of the second pillar and the definition of the CAP's content after 2013 should strongly stay abreast of the demographic situation, and the creation of new jobs and diverse income opportunities in rural areas goes beyond traditional agriculture.

Alternatively urban areas are also facing their own individual problems. With a generally more diverse population, the public services that cities have to offer, especially to the new incoming migrant workers, have increased significantly over the past years, and cities are having to face up to the reality of having to adapt to the changes that new cultures bring to them. Cities also have the worry in the future, with the threat of a declining population in certain cases, of not being able to provide essential services to its citizens, which account for 80% of the population of the EU. Being the economic powerhouses of the EU, cities need increasing assistance in tackling these emerging obstacles.

Regarding the situations in rural as well as in urban areas, it is wise to approach the problems in these areas not separately. Integrated solutions where urban and rural areas are linked can be more effective for inhabitants.

The Member States and the regions have to master different challenges of demographic change – declining population, increase of the number of elderly people, immigration and migration processes. We as a network

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believe it is essential in order to support these efforts that European structural policy considers these different regional trends with regard population-ageing and population-changes in its strategic orientation. All policies should be screened regarding their compatibility with the challenges of demographic change.

Conclusions

As Commissioner Hübner mentioned in a conference on demographic change in 2006, approximately 50% of regions will see a decline in their population by 2030, and it is widely acknowledged that the remaining population will have a higher proportion of older people. It is increasingly clear that demographic change is fastly approaching, and in some regions it is already prevalent.

For those regions that are currently facing decline due to demographic change, the European Commission should provide support for conversion and sustainable development. For those regions where only the first signs of these challenges are becoming obvious, Commission support should be given that encourages the exchange of information and experience from the regions that have experienced demographic change to those who will possibly will face the same challenges in the coming future. We as a network are already doing this on a very small scale, but it is clear that there is real need to continue this work on a larger scale and with a greater number of regions.

Projects financed by European funds will have an influence on the demographic development of regions. In regions where its declining and ageing population is having significant effects on the social, economic and environmental makeup of the region, it is necessary to take into consideration that these projects have to be sustainable and take a long-term view.

We as a network appreciate having the opportunity to contribute to this debate on the future of cohesion policy in the EU, and look forward to collaborating with the Commission on initiatives in the future.

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This contribution is supported by following regions in the network:

Brandenburg (Germany)

East Finland Region with Kainuu, North Karelia, Etelä-Savo and Pohjois-Savo (Finland)

Galicia (Spain)

Limburg (Netherlands)

Limousin (France)

Lower Austria - Niederösterreich (Austria)

Lubuskie (Poland)

Mazovia – Mazowieckie (Poland)

North West England (United Kingdom)

Municipality of Plovdiv - Община Пловдив, България (Bulgaria)

Saxony – Sachsen (Germany)

Saxony-Anhalt – Sachsen-Anhalt (Germany)

Region of Western Greece - Περιφέρεια Δυτικής Ελλάδος (Greece)